

Ashby's many years as a fighter for Human Rights...



When the Urban League of Essex County celebrated its 40th birthday in 1967 its first director, William Ashby,

joined the then director, James A. Pawley, outside agency's building at 58 Jones St.

Newark Honors Civil-Rights Veteran

Reprinted from The New York Times

NEWARK, Oct. 31—For William Ashby, the first step toward a lifetime commitment to the civil-rights movement came one morning at the turn of the century when he joined into the flow of an orphanage who was being hanged from a tree after a lynching in his hometown of Newport News, Va.

That commitment, which has spanned more than 80 years, was the subject of a special memorial presentation this week during a William Ashby Day in Newark. It was also the occasion last night of a cocktail party attended by scores of public officials, community leaders and friends honoring Mr. Ashby on his 85th birthday.

Mr. Ashby's career, beginning in 1904 when he said, "I had learned that the only way to make a difference in the world is to be a white establishment in America — progressed through

what he views as the greatest era of social change for blacks in the nation—the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, the labor leader; Whitney M. Young of the Urban League, and other writers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

During an interview today the newspaper Mr. Ashby, a graduate of Lincoln University and Yale University School of Social Work, described the civil-rights movement's current status in America as "almost paradoxical." The autobiographies, excerpts from which have appeared in the Yale University alumni magazine and in serial form in the now-defunct Newark Evening

News, have been tentatively entitled "Some Unimportant Incidents in the Life of an Important Man Who is 85 and Still Alive."

Mr. Ashby and his wife, Mary—they have been married 50 years—have been active in Newark affairs and he managed to find time for a long daily walk about the city, which he admits being "very chauvinistic about."

Public officials who have known Mr. Ashby over the years say he seems to be even more confident and more outspoken now than he did one day more than 10 years ago when he was asked by an interviewer what had been the black people's biggest problem in Newark during the last 50 years.

"Everything is the biggest problem," he replied. "Just being alive and being a Negro is a problem."

In his later years William Ashby has remained outspoken. In 1967, when Dr. Martin Luther King's early opposition to the Vietnam war was questioned by the Newark Evening News, Ashby wrote the following letter to the newspaper:

U.S. 'Magnanimity'

To the Editor:

I take exception to *The Newark* question-begging editorial on "Dr. King's View."

I quote in part, "It is also his privilege to ignore the fact that for every U.S. soldier who fires shot or shell against the enemy, thousands are deployed in massive ministering to the medical and economic needs of the South Vietnamese people."

We invade the people's country. We drop millions of tons of explosives and kill thousands of innocent men, women and children. We burn villages. We make unproductive their rich rice lands. And for all of this we, in our magnanimity, send some packages of surplus, cartons of vitamins, and loads and loads of canned food.

Newspapers know that we are wrong. They do not admit it because of a lack of honesty, and they live to be disavowed.

Our leaders in high places know that we are wrong. Why else would they keep saying that we will accept any plan from any man anywhere in the world that will bring this killing to an end? They know they've got a tiger by the tail.

One thing and one thing alone prevents us from bringing these endless hostilities to an immediate end. It is "Americanism." We have convinced ourselves that God has sanctioned us in Mr. Goli and that spoken unto us "America, of all the nations I have created, I have given only you the power and the privilege to keep My enemy world in a state of order."

In every deed Dr. King is perfectly right.

Newark William M. Ashby

The above article is reprinted from The New York Times of Nov. 1, 1974

excerpts from Ashby's forthcoming book . . .

'TALES WITHOUT HATE'

From Chapter 39:

I graduated. What now? In 1911, what does a Negro male, approaching 22, do with a bachelor of arts degree from a Negro college? The answers open to me were very few and rapidly prescribed. I could get a position as a teacher. That would mean that I had to go into the deep South. I could continue my education and become a minister, lawyer or doctor.

Mama wanted me to become a doctor. I could never get up the courage to tell her pointedly "No." But I always knew that it could never be. I had thought I might become a lawyer, but changed my mind.

The last, the only opportunity of employment left open to me was to go back into a hotel or restaurant as a waiter.

I got a job as a waiter in the catering establishment of W. B. Day and Son on Broad Street, Newark.

I felt a veritable disgust for myself. I was a disappointment to myself, a disappointment to Mama, a disappointment to lots of people who knew that I ought to do better.

A college degree, and still a waiter. I needed no college degree to be, I was. I had worked with hundreds of waiters. Some of the best of them could neither read nor write. But with all of my learning, I had not risen one inch above them. I knew that I must do something. What?

One day, strolling along Market Street, I saw a placard in a window. In heavy letters across the top was the name "Eugene V. Debs." It said Debs would speak at the Labor Lyceum in Springfield Avenue. My decision to hear him was immediate. I had read something about Debs, enough to make me believe that I ought to hear.

The man completely captivated me.

I was caught up in his words as he railed against the coal barons, steel barons, ship-owning barons,

Here are some of the events from William M. Ashby's life, told in his own words. These passages appear in his autobiography, which he began writing in his 70s. He originally entitled it "Some Unimportant Incidents in the Life of an Unimportant Man Who is 85 and Still Alive." Since then he has changed the title to "A Negro Tells One Hundred Tales Without Hate." Portions of the manuscript were published in 1970 in the

railroad barons, for their persecution and exploitation of poor and unorganized working men. This I understood thoroughly.

Debs changed my mood. He spoke of brotherhood. He made a passionate plea for man to serve his fellow man.

"There," I thought, "I will devote my life to the service of my fellow man. I will be a foreign missionary. I will go to Africa and convert all the heathen."

But I still did not know what to do; which way to turn.

From Chapter 51:

In 1917, I went to New York to the office of the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, located at 2307 7th Ave. I conferred with John T. Clark, industrial secretary of the league. The interview went on for quite some time.

I told him of my training in social science at Yale. He rose and led me to the room. In a little while, he inquired and beckoned me to follow him. "I want you to meet Mr. Eugene Kinckle Jones, our executive director," he said.

We went to a room on the second floor. "Mr. Jones, this is Mr. Ashby. I think you might see him somewhere in our program."

[I]ot recognized me. We had met at a student conference while I was still in school.

Jones remarked that hundreds of thousands of Negroes were pouring into the cities of the North to work in industrial plants, committed to the production of materials for the war. They created a multiplicity of problems which were new, and with which no cities had the knowledge to deal.

The Urban League, at that time was the only organization whose purpose and aim might give direction to the solution of some of the problems. Consequently, applications were coming in very rapidly

Newark Sunday News and the Yale Alumni Magazine. The Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee is now seeking a foundation grant to publish the entire 250 pages of recollections as a book for distribution to libraries, schools, community groups and interested individuals. The following section Ashby relates experiences in Newark in the 1930s and 1940s.

from various cities, anxious to set up branches of the league.

One of the cities was Newark, Jones said. "I understand that you have lived in Newark. That could be a great advantage to you. I will, therefore, be glad to recommend your name to the board of directors of the Newark organization."

I could hardly contain my satisfaction.

He said that the organization contemplated beginning its activities on or before Sept. 1.

I told him I had a job for the summer. He advised me to report for my job and he would inform me of the decision of the board in Newark.

I had been working in the kitchen service at perhaps those weeks when I received a letter from Jones, telling me that I had been selected for the Newark post.

From Chapter 54:

I had been at my job in the executive secretary of the Negro Welfare League of New Jersey — now the Urban League of Essex County — for about four weeks. A telephone call came from Miss Helen B. Pender, asking me to come to her office about 11:30 a.m. She said she had a meeting with one of the new group of ambitious white women who were graduating from the colleges in the first decades of the century. All of them more or less had been touched by the great humanitarianism and philosophy of being known "mother's helper," of which Lane Adams was the symbol and which was so dramatically expressed by Hull House, Chicago.

She became supervisor of case work in the Newark Bureau of Associated Industries. Miss Pender wanted to take me and introduce me to a well-known philanthropist from whom it was hoped I might obtain a sizable donation for the league. We boarded a trolley car at Central Avenue and

Broad Street and got off at Broad and Market streets. At that time civility was not dead. A gentleman raised his hat when approaching a lady. A gentleman asked and gave a lady his seat on the trolley car. A gentleman invited a lady who stopped off a car to a gentleman always extended his strong hand to assist a lady getting out of a carriage, or stopping off a trolley car. All this I knew.

But as I grew to be the belief in color superiority, that all over the land there prevailed the conviction that about the flesh of all white women was something outrageous and that, if that flesh were touched by a Negro, it would be contaminated.

I did not extend my hand to Miss Penelope as she dropped off the trolley. When we reached the sidewalk, Miss Penelope stopped suddenly.

Staring mutely at me, she said, "Mr. Ashby, you are not a gentleman. A gentleman would assist a lady to get out of a trolley without offering his hand to assist her."

Since that moment, I have treated all women with the same deference, no matter what the color of their skin, whether they were born, who was their father, whether they weigh 250 pounds, or just 70.

"There is no one whom I am better than. On the other hand, there never has been in all the billions of people who have lived, who are now alive, and who will yet be born, anyone who is better than I am."

— William M. Ashby

From Chapter 16

Thousands of uneducated young women flocked to New York. They came mainly from rural areas of the South. They were not prepared to meet a single area of large city life. Of even so fundamental a thing as clothing, they were ignorant. They came in the deep of the winter in the thin cotton dresses worn in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama or Florida. If they had a resource at all, in texture, was to loose the wintery winds of New Jersey whipped through.

But the moral implications to these girls were the things which grew in the moist countries. Unlike the white girl, there was no Young Women's Christian Association to give shelter or provide advice. They simply stood out and alone without a buffer of any sort.

Mr. Richard C. Jenkinson was a member of the executive board of the Negro Urban League. She was of a family whose roots were deep in New Jersey's history.

I discussed with her the possibility of purchasing a building—where would provide a home and also where to house instruction for all that came of the new young women.

Mr. Jenkinson said, "I have a friend, a very wealthy friend. If we can interest her, it is very possible that a home for these girls can be purchased. I'll try to arrange an appointment for you."

This friend was Mrs. Felix Fuld. Mrs. Fuld was the wife of Felix Fuld, who was also the sister of Louis Brandegee. Brandegee, Fuld and Mrs. Fuld owned the L. Brandegee Co., one of the largest department stores in the country. Mrs. Fuld had an office on the seventh floor of the building. When her secretary showed me to her office door, I cannot say I was the calmest person in all the world. Luckily for me, she did not see me with a multitude of questions in obvious sympathy and sympathy, she said, "I have something about what you came to see me for. My dear friend, Mr. Jenkinson, has told me something about you. I do not need telling you that she spoke very highly of you. How much do you expect me to give you?"

From unaccustomed I shall never know where I said "\$500."

She pressed a button. Her secretary appeared at the door.

"Please tell Mr. Fuld to come here."

I do not know why I did not jump up and run out of the place with flight. I had said the wrong thing. I had said for too much.

Fuld's office was but a few feet down the side. He came directly. First introducing me to his husband, Mrs. Fuld said, "This gentleman wants me to give him \$500."

"Well give him the \$500," he said. He turned and walked out of the room.

The abundance with which he sanctioned the gift simply mystified me. What kind of people were these? This was an enormous sum of money. Yet, Fuld spoke of it with less concern than I would part with a penny in a slot machine to get a stick of gum.

Mrs. Fuld said, "Mr. Ashby, I am so deeply moved by your position that I will give you twice the money needed. It is time for me to go away for the summer, but I'll postpone that for a week or two."

We set the paid of \$10,000. Mrs. Fuld went out among her friends. I went to industries with which I had worked. Smith and Co., Strauss & Co., J. H. Ladow, Balthorn and Johnson.

In about 10 days or two weeks, we had raised between six to seven of \$35,000.

I purchased a four-story brick building at 38 W. Market Street for \$14,000. The first floor was for the office of the League. The three floors above were the dormitories and reception room for young women.

From Chapter 16

Newark operated a summer camp for underprivileged children at the shore. It was called, "Camp Away from the Sea." The camp was open for six weeks during the summer. The first few weeks were for white children. The last week was for Negroes. That is the way all organizations with camp programs operated.

Randall Weldon, director of recreation of the Board of Education, supervised the camp program. Even the tickets given to the children differed in color. I visited Weldon about the ridiculousness of such separation, but added that I thoroughly understood the city's reasoning. Those who ran the city must stand that if the Negro children and the white children were sent into the Atlantic Ocean at the same time, the current of the ocean would swim, the water would become stagnant and all the black would wash off the Negro children and stick on the whites, sending them down to their mothers either all black or deep purple.

Weldon asked the Urban League to assist in the distribution of the tickets to Negro children in our area.

One morning a group of children, perhaps nine or 10, came into the office. They were from Camden Street. They were nine or 10 years of age.

The leader of the group was a rather dark little boy. "My want tickets to go to camp," he said.

"The good boys are white boys. What would I do about him? Often I had met the problem of whites going to the Negro child. 'No, you can't do so and so. No, you can't go with such and such a place. You're a colored boy.'"

Now I must discriminate against a white boy. I must do him the very thing that I so violently railed being done to me.

Must I tell him the truth? I felt asked — a liar and a coward rolled into one.

I issued the tickets to the Negro children. The little leader, seeing what had happened, said to me, "You didn't give Terry none."

Now, most miserable than ever, I offered some reason.

"But he's my friend," persisted the boy.

I tried to assure him that I would take care of Terry, that I would make a special trip to the City Hall to get a ticket for him.

"Come on, gang," commanded the little fellow. When they got to the door, I heard a sudden snap. A voice said, "Wait a minute."

There was a shuffling of feet. The noise grew louder. They had reversed themselves. They were coming back to me.

I had stood staring at me for a minute. Then, literally throwing the small piece of cardboard in my reach, he said, "Here, master, take your ticket. If my friend can't go, I don't want to go."

In my long life, I have read more books, heard more lectures and sermons, seen more plays and heard much high-minded moral; all on the subject of brotherhood.

Of all these, the only one I remember is that which came from the dark lips of that little boy standing before me. His left arm was thrown over the shoulder of Terry, saying, "Now, master, take your ticket. If my friend can't go, I don't want to go."

"I do not hate anyone. I never use the word in referring to another human being. Does that mean I can't love everybody? Certainly not. But I do not hate them. I do not even necessarily avoid them. To hate anyone, one must generate in himself a degree of mental and emotional animosity. Why should I make myself miserable by always being mad at somebody?"

— William M. Ashby

From Chapter 16

I was on the corner of Broad and Market streets. It was 12 o'clock. I went for lunch in a restaurant that was about five or six doors from Broad Street. I had a small place.

I had a salmon sandwich, 30 cents; corned beef, 10 cents; a cup of tea, 5 cents.

When the waiters gave me the check, it came to 90 cents. "You made a mistake," I corrected the waiter.

"My food was only 45 cents. You purchased 90 cents."

"It's 90 cents for you."

"But," I exclaimed in my concentration, "look at the menu there."

"I know what it is on the menu. It's 90 cents for your kind."

As clear as the daylight outside, it came to me what was happening. "Oh," I exclaimed, "I see."

My waiter was a white man. He needed to get up his 100 per cent. "All right, let's see you get it," I shouted back.

At the cashier's desk, I put down 45 cents and handed out.

"Hey, waiter," called the cashier, "take back. You made a mistake. Your check is 90 cents."

My heart was quick and positive. "It is like hell. I had a salmon sandwich, pie and tea. Here's my card and my telephone number. Come there and try to collect the rest."

I went into the restaurant rather frequently afterwards, never again was I wronged.

From Chapter 16

Because of my assignment in the U.S. Employment Service, I was increasingly called in to confer with a member of the association, and indeed, he sat in on our executive meetings as they shared their efforts. With many of them, I learned a very cordial relationship.

Of so much value had been their efforts that when the War Department awarded them a certificate of merit with warm praise. Disposition of the certificate was natural, since there was nothing left for it to do, but a few persons thought otherwise.

They argued that an organization which had been so effective in war, should now devote itself to peace, and work even harder to get the state back to its peacetime living.

A meeting was called to discuss this point. It was a dinner meeting, held at the Tower Hotel Club, then on the 10th floor of the Kinner Building at Broad and Market streets.

The meeting was presided over by Col. Lewis T. Bryant, who was the commissioner of Labor of New Jersey, and also the assistant director of the U.S. Employment Service.

In those days, all after-dinner speakers began in one of the following manner. "Friends, I am reminded of a story they tell about Solomon, the old shrewd one. 'There's one thing I found out in my life, that is, about Terry, the old dog headbitch.' or 'Did you hear this one about Paddy, the old snailfisher?' or 'I'm told tell you this one about Sam, the old nigger.'"

After the time for Felix Fuld to speak, he began by telling a story about an old "darker" in the South, Brazil, it was a good joke, not told too well, but I laughed. I laugh freely at any joke if it has humor, no matter at whom it is directed, or about whom it is told.

The meeting was about to adjourn, when I noticed a man some distance from me get to his feet. I recognized him as a manager of the Standard Oil Co. of N.J. He said, "Mr. Chairman, and gentlemen, we have had a successful evening and I think that we have accomplished something. But I think that we ought not to close this meeting before hearing from one among men I see sitting over there. He persisted in a bit, but he always came through when we needed him. I think we ought to have a word from Bill Ashby."

I was shocked. I could not have dreamed that I would be called upon to respond. What would I say?

I told them that as employers, many of them had the experience of Negroes working in industry for the first time, and that they must come to the conclusion a good one. I pleaded with them not to retaliate — I had learned many of them planned to get back at Negroes because of the poor performance of some — by firing them and driving them back with the thousands.

At 8:30 the next evening, but as I entered the door of my office, the telephone rang. My secretary, Miss Earline Rieley, said "You see, Mr. Ashby."

Mr. Fuld, I said, "Mr. Ashby, Mr. Fuld would like to see you today. Can you come?"

"When?"

"It's urgent, can you come right now?"

I started for Brandegee's. All the time I was wondering why I should have a word with him. He had quite a substantial donation to the work of the league. But his annual donation had been sent just a few months ago. He could not be waiting to make another contribution now.

One of the things Brandegee's used a full quota of Negro men and women, as operators on the machines, a job opening for which the Urban League had been responsible in the first place. Sometimes when little problems would come up concerning the Negro employees I would be asked to come in and try to settle them. But on such occasions I always talked with Edna Brandegee, the nephew of Louis Brandegee.

Fuld sat at a large, oval, highly polished dark walnut table. I entered the room, he arose, walked toward the table, shook my hand, and held me at the door.

From his left coat pocket, he withdrew a shining gold cigarette case. He offered me a smoke. It was a Turkish brand, I think. I said, "I was wrong. I did not want it, but what else could I do?"

Back in his seat, he looked worriedly across the table at me and said, "Mr. Ashby, I want to apologize to you for what I said last night."

"Apologize? I should be glad to do so."

"I told a joke which seemed to poke fun at your people," he said. "Please believe me, I make no harm. I would not insult any man because of his race. Remember, I am one come from a people who have known persecution for centuries. I know how deep these things can cut. I have done very little of right. The last thing I said, I told you as I felt honest. This evening was to tell Mr. Ashby and apologize. Please forgive me."

I knew of few examples to match the candor and honesty which came from the seat of Felix Fuld. As he leaned across the table that morning and said, "Please forgive me."

Ashby Remains Outspoken

Rights Champion Active at 75

William Ashby Was First N.J. Negro Social Worker

This article appeared in the Newark Sunday News on Oct. 18, 1964, and was widely distributed by the National Urban League.

By DOUGLAS ELDRIDGE

After half a century of observing and trying to improve the lot of Negroes in Newark, William M. Ashby is as active—and as optimistic—as ever.

Ashby, who turned 75 last Thursday, has probably spent as much time as anyone in Newark in advancing the cause of racial equality. He was the first full-time Negro social worker in the state, and he founded and directed the first Urban League offices in Newark and Elizabeth.

Retired for the last 11 years, he still attends several meetings a week as a founder and budget chairman of the Newark Human Rights Commission, and as a member of Freedom International and other groups. He also spends much of his time writing plays and novels about Negro life.

A cheerful, straightforward man, Ashby remained yesterday almost his own expert—and the champion in his city since he first came here to work as a writer while his graduation from Lincoln University in 1911. Ashby, one of a damn old lot of a great educator in Africa, Virginia, and—well, everywhere he's been—has been working on his way to Atlanta City.

After two years in Newark, he went to Yale University and obtained a bachelor's degree in social work. He taught school in Durham, N.C., for a year, and did a study on factory conditions there that attracted the attention of the newly formed National Urban League.

Urban League 2nd

While working as a writer in the Carolina during the summer of 1917, the Urban League invited him to set up its first New Jersey branch—and its sixth in the country—in Newark.

At that time the city's Negro population was barely 33,000. With a few companies, Negroes then were confined to the most menial jobs with a few companies, lived in tenements and shacks, and were excluded from hotels and restaurants.

Ashby set up shop as The Negro Welfare League of N.J., in Mulberry Street, but within a year he and others raised enough money to buy a four-story building at 58 N. Market St. for the league's headquarters and a residence for single Negro girls.

In the early days, while still working part time for the old U.S. Office of Negro Education, he spent much of his time finding housing and jobs for young Negroes who were being sent to work here from southern homes.

Long before many of today's civil rights leaders were born, Ashby was campaigning against discrimination, and working health, recreational and educational facilities for Newark's Negroes.

"If you think Negroes live badly now, you should have seen it then," Ashby recalled. But even then, he said, there

was remarkably little hostility between races in Newark, and few whites were completely unyielding opponents of any integration.

Retired in 1953

Ashby retired from the local Urban League in 1957 for brief stints with a job company and a weekly newspaper, and then became a news writer in the city's feature division. In 1952 he became director of the Springfield (Ill.) Urban League, and in 1944 set up the Urban League of Eastern Union County, Elizabeth. He retired in 1953.

During the 1930s he was secretary of the Newark NAACP, and in 1940-41 he served on the New Jersey Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Some of his plays have been produced by amateur groups, and recently he finished the first draft of a novel.

Ashby what has been the Negro's biggest problem in Newark during the last 40 years, Ashby promptly replied: "Everything is the biggest problem—just being alive and being a Negro is a problem."

On the other hand, he praised the city's long tradition of racial peace. In his view, it is the result of the spiritual diversity of John Newark has provided to Negroes, and the work of better relations groups.

Opposes Quotas

Ashby is a strong opponent of racial quotas, but he endorses all the tactics of the modern civil rights movement. "Everything they've done is all right with me," he declares. "The business of gradualism is as dead as can be, and that's the way it ought to be."

He says he is unafraid of any where back to the Negro there. "The rough edge is there, but they'll smooth over," he asserts. "Let's get it over with. . . . The whole reason we're here is that we don't have to worry about Negroes any more."

Some conflict is inevitable, he said, but racial problems will ultimately be solved because most people "will want to do the right thing." But much is yet to be done, and Ashby, who noted that this year's anniversary of the civil rights bill—was the first time he felt able to sing the National Anthem with the confidence that is in order. "The land of the free."

He and his wife, Mrs. Mary Arnold Ashby, a native of Mississippi, celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary earlier this year. Their only child, Mrs. Kathryn Dunbar, died in 1944 while expecting her first child.

The Ashbys live in a house they have owned for 40 years at 15 Irving St., in the heart of an almost all-white neighborhood. On the Ashby mantelpiece are mementoes of a dozen neighborhood youngsters who have made the Ashby house a second home.

That mantelpiece is one of the last remnants of continued optimism for Ashby as he begins his 76th year.



William Ashby and his wife, Mary, posed outside their home at 214 West Market St. as they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in 1974.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA CRANE



Mr. and Mrs. William Ashby shared a laugh with Mayor Kenneth A. Gibson at Ashby's 85th birthday party in Thomson's Restaurant in 1974.



William Ashby, second from right in the middle row, was a faculty of Yale University chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Ashby was 25 when picture was taken in 1915.

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